



Ch'an Newsletter

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HUMAN, HINAYANA, AND MAHAYANA

(Lecture given by Master Sheng-yen on the Surangama Sutra, Sunday, June 7, 1987)

The Buddha saw that Ananda strove not for his personal enlightenment, but the enlightenment of all beings. Thus Ananda was no longer interested in the sravaka or pratyekabuddha paths, which are associated with self-deliverance alone and are part of Hinayana practice. The Buddha then prepared to reveal the supreme Mahayana teaching to him. In doing so, the Buddha dismissed the concepts of cause and condition and of self-existence which were familiar to Ananda. Ananda asked the Buddha to explain the truth that lies beneath these concepts. The doctrine of cause and condition, taken to its extreme, suggests that all of your actions and everything that befalls you is predetermined. Self-existence, taken to its extreme, suggests that all things and events are random and unrelated. In the Mahayana teaching neither of these doctrines are considered to be ultimately true.

I will now go into some of the differences between Hinayana and Mahayana. When Sakyamuni attained Buddhahood, he began to teach the Dharma, and he found that those who listened to him had varying capacities to understand his teaching.

Some people understand and enjoy Buddhadharma, sometimes from the first moment they hear it. Others have a harder time. Recently, someone came up to me and said, "Shih-fu, I can't understand what you're saying about the Surangama Sutra. I'm not sure that I'm going to continue to come to your lectures. This stuff doesn't mean anything to me. Why don't you talk about something relevant to daily life, instead of addressing scholars and philosophers."

Buddhadharma can apply to all levels – from the shallow to the profound. The shallow level pertains to the kind of things the person I just mentioned wants to hear, things relevant to everyday life. Deeper is Hinayana Buddhadharma, in which one seeks his own salvation, leaving the cycle of birth and death. Deepest is Mahayana Buddhadharma, in which one seeks not only personal salvation, but the salvation of all others as well.

What is your level? You can find out by seeing how you react to the various teachings. If the Hinayana teachings seem complete to you and accord with your idea of Buddhadharma, then that is your level. If, on the other hand, your interest lies in the problems of everyday life, then yours is the common level of Buddhadharma.

Hinayana Buddhism preaches personal salvation, deliverance of suffering for the individual. The Hinayana practitioner is not concerned with the salvation of others, yet he himself transcends suffering.

Do any of you worry about the end of the world? Many people are deeply concerned about this. The end of the world may come about by natural causes — a new ice age perhaps — or by man-made causes — a nuclear holocaust. Some worry that the depleted ozone layer will bring about an ice-age, and they are busy trying to prevent it.

Is this a Hinayana or a Mahayana concern? Difficult to say, because this is a world-wide problem. Is the concern helping the individual or the entire world?

Another example: next year I'll be sixty. In twenty years, when I'm eighty, perhaps half the world's population will be dead from the AIDS virus. After forty years, perhaps the whole human race will be gone. What if I thought, "Eighty's fine for me. I don't care what happens after I'm gone"? Is this a Hinayana or Mahayana attitude? It is neither. This is the thinking of common people, who care only for immediate personal benefit and perhaps that of their children and their grandchildren. This can be called the human level of Buddhist teaching.

The second level, that of Hinayana, refers to people whose concerns are not of this world. A Hinayana practitioner is not concerned about his past, his future, his body, his self, or anyone else. His purpose is to attain nirvana, the state of no birth no death. Once this is attained, he's out of this world and has no concern for it. This kind of teaching is other-worldly. It is active in regard to the goal of nirvana, but passive in regard to the world.

At the third level, the Mahayana level, the practitioner is not apart from the world, yet neither is he attached to it. He is active in the world. So, we need to know if we are more Hinayana or Mahayana.

Most people belong to the first level. They belong to the world, and they look out for their own benefit. One who looks beyond this world, towards his own enlightenment can be considered to be on the Hinayana path. Mahayana may be thought of as a combination of the human and Hinayana levels. It is the level where one seeks one's own salvation, but is still concerned with what goes on in this world.

Yesterday, I lectured in Boston, and a professor came up to me and told me that he dislikes the world, but that he is too attached to it to make an effort to leave. Most people don't like the world. There are few people who are content with their lives, who say the world is wonderful and everything in it is perfect. Maybe only children would feel this way. Do you remember ever really liking everything in the world? As a child perhaps, but now as an adult when something good happens, you don't want it to end, because you feel that there are many unpleasant things in the world.

About thirty years ago there was an American who visited mainland China, and fell in love with it. He said, "All the Chinese wear the same clothes, and they seem to get along so well. They're so nice and friendly. They're wonderful people. I wish I could be one of them." He only stayed for a week, and when he got back to America, he thought that by comparison America was flooded with too many material things and it was beset by unsolvable problems. He wished to go back to China, and he vowed that if he ever got back there, he would stay. Finally, he got his chance, but after six months, he was bored. Everything was the same. Day in, day out, nothing ever changed. He finally decided that the United States was better after all.

Many Chinese seem to think that the moon is rounder in America than in China. They believe everything is better here. They want to come here, because they think everyone's rich and life is easy. Many who do get here are disappointed. Things aren't the way they dreamed. Look at the Vietnamese refugees. They came to this country, but they still have problems and fight with each other. Even Americans born here fight with one another.

There is no one who completely likes or completely dislikes the world. We are born into the world because of the greed in our minds, and because of this, even though we may dislike the world, we are reluctant to part with it.

In China there once was a grand minister who visited a monastery with a thousand monks. When they ate, they made no noise – the quiet would have been remarkable for one person, let alone a thousand. The minister felt he had come upon a place of great purity and tranquility, and he told this to the abbott. The abbott asked him to try to live at the monastery for seven days. But the minister refused, and said he was much too busy. After he retired, however, he would try to come and see what it was like. The abbott said by that time he would be in no condition for strenuous practice. It is one thing to admire someone, it is quite another to actually attempt the same lifestyle or accomplishments.

Look at the typical relationship between husband and wife. You may see a couple who help one another and who enjoy each other's company, and you may admire their relationship. They may appear happy on the surface, but almost all of the couples I have talked to say that they really feel that their marriage is not that

great. Even so, they remain married and endure the pain they may give one another. Some couples tell me that they fight several times each week or even every day. Or they may not fight but just sullenly avoid each other. Most couples bear these difficulties to a greater or lesser extent without breaking up. Some say that since they got married, they'll stay married. Sometimes one spouse will be so kind or so nice, that his or her faults can be overlooked. Nobody is perfectly satisfied all the time. Couples may not like what they're going through, but neither are they ready to throw it all away. This is human. This is the human level.

Those who truly renounce the world are rare. Many dislike this or that about the world, but few really want to isolate themselves and practice seriously. This is really to say that there are few people at the Hinayana level. There are those who may be prepared to renounce the world and become monks or nuns, but they secretly feel, "If I have the opportunity to get married, I would have to think twice about continuing serious practice." People who sincerely renounce the world and devote everything to practice are rare indeed.

Even in Sakyamuni's lifetime, people with the resolve of the Hinayana mind were very few. Today there are even fewer. In the Hinayana tradition the practitioner leaves the world, and lives alone in the mountains, vowing never to associate with lay people or people of the opposite sex. They single-mindedly seek deliverance from birth and death. They don't associate with people of the opposite sex because the man-woman relationship is the cause of life and death. Such practice is true Hinayana.

Generally, however, most monks and nuns dwell in the ordinary world. They continue to have contact with lay people and lay practitioners. These are the bikhsus and bikhsunis of the world. They cannot be called Hinayanists because they are really following a Mahayana tradition. Sakyamuni encouraged his disciples to go out and ask for alms. This is a Mahayana action, because in doing this the monks and nuns establish karmic contact with people, and this is the way to future salvation.

A true Mahayanist is not concerned with his or her own salvation. The practitioner vows to attain Buddhahood, and takes the bodhisattva path to this goal. Therefore, he exerts himself to help others, to convert and save others. If the practitioner helps others to achieve true freedom, then he will have little vexation, although he is not concerned about his own deliverance.

For example, suppose Manhattan were sinking and you owned a great ship. Unconcerned with your own well-being or the chance of success, you take a great number of people on your ship, sail to safety, and you save everyone on the ship. Are you also saved? Of course, you, too, are on the ship. This is Mahayana.

Suppose, in the same situation, you felt that it would be impossible to fit all the people in Manhattan on your ship, but you decided to try anyway. In this case

would your reaction be Mahayana or Hinayana? It would still be Mahayana, but a lower level than that of the previous example. This would be how a lesser bodhisattva would act. In the first example there was no doubt, no intimidation. In this example the mind is not opened enough, the mind power not strong enough, so you would not be able to take everyone. In the mind the consideration still exists that the ship cannot hold all these people. A great bodhisattva, however, would not consider how many people the ship can hold. He continues to take passengers until there is absolutely no room. You might comment that if he tried to get everyone on the ship, it might sink. If you think that way, you are a small bodhisattva, not a great bodhisattva.

A truly great bodhisattva would think, "Manhattan is a great island, but my ship is greater still. The entire world is like a small balloon compared to my ship. Even the universe would not fill it." A true great bodhisattva does not consider time or capacity. He does not think, "If I can't finish taking people today, I'll take more tomorrow." He doesn't consider things like this.

If we look at the text, we see that Ananda is confused by the Buddha's comments about cause and condition. This is because Ananda is still thinking about time-bound cause and condition and space-bound cause and condition. This thinking is still within the Hinayana framework; it is not Mahayana. It is not the supreme truth, because any concept of past, present and future is still within Hinayana.

The Surangama Sutra repeatedly emphasizes that the Dharma it speaks of is not the Dharma of cause and condition, nor the Dharma of self-existence. According to Hinayana teaching, things do have cause and condition and things may be spoken of as having self-existence. But these are not true Mahayana concepts. Suppose, for example, you were hit by a car as you walked down the street, and later you said, "It was an accident, isolated and meaningless. There was no reason for it to happen, it just happened." This is the doctrine of self-existence – events are random and unconnected. On the other hand, after the accident happened, suppose you said, "This was fate. There was nothing that I could have done about it, even if I had looked left and right a hundred times before I started to walk across the street." This is the doctrine of cause and condition. Most people believe in these doctrines to some extent, consciously or unconsciously. But the Dharma of the Surangama Sutra is neither the Hinayana Dharma of cause and condition, nor the Dharma of self-existence held by many non-Buddhists.

*** NEWS ITEMS ***

- We had 29 participants in the Christmas retreat.
- Shih-fu left for Taiwan on January 8, 1988, he will be back April 27.
- Rev. Jen Jin is lecturing on *The Buddha speaks the Sutra of the Dharani of Determination* on Sundays from 1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. This series will continue until March 6, 1988.
- We are celebrating **Chinese New Year** on February 21. Everyone is welcome to the festivity.
- Professor Li will be lecturing on March 13 and 20 from 1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.
- Our next one-day sitting will be on March 4, from 8:00 p.m. to March 5, 9:00 p.m. It is \$10.00 for members and \$15.00 for non-members.

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